

Fear of hassle saps booming sectors

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Sale of high price items such as automobiles and apartments has dropped significantly in the country after the law enforcement agencies started to keep a close eye on the sellers of these commodities to gather information about their clients.

Fear of attracting the attention of law enforcers has turned the affluent section of the city hesitant over spending and that has caused a nosedive in sales of various other luxury items including digital and electronics gadgets and gizmos.

Especially the automobile and the booming real estate industry in the city have been smacked the hardest by the snag in sales triggered by the governments' move to collect their buyers' personal financial information.

According to M Salahuddin, president of Bangladesh Automobile Distributors Association (BADA), sales of new cars have witnessed a drastic fall since January.

"Sales of new cars have fallen drastically in Dhaka, Sylhet and Chittagong since January and things are getting more hectic as there are more and more [imported] cars getting lined up at Chittagong port everyday," said Salahuddin.

Haq's Bay Automobiles Ltd officials told this correspondent that they sold 27 reconditioned cars in February from its Naya Paltan showroom while their usual average sale used to be around 60 a month.

According to Zahir Ahmed Ansary, sales executive of JR Autos Ltd, said since the political scenario changed after the

declaration of state of emergency, they managed to sell only two cars till March 21 while their average sale each month used to be around 10 to 12 cars.

"Business has been really bad for the last few months. Although we expected things to get better after the declaration of emergency, things are yet to get any better," said Ansary.

"People are not even visiting the showrooms let alone buying cars as they do not want to spend on luxury items in fear of drawing attention of the law enforcement agencies," said Abdul Haque, president of Bangladesh Reconditioned Vehicles Importers and Dealers Association (Barvida).

"Importers also stopped opening letters of credit for importing vehicles mainly due to abrupt fall in sales and the recent government initiative to clear the Chittagong port area," he added.

Sales officials at Car Zone Ltd, an automobile trading company at Dhanmondi, said they sold 24 brand-new Japanese Subaru vehicles in November alone last year. Whereas, in three months from January till March this year, the total number of sale shrank to only six.

"Customers have become very cautious about buying brand-new cars. I don't know what the actual reasons are, but the flow of buyers dropped sharply after the declaration of emergency," said Jahangir Alam, a sales official at Car Zone Ltd.

"The overall sales of reconditioned vehicles have dropped by more than half since last month," said Abdul



Sale of cars and other luxury items has dropped ever since imposition of emergency.

Haque, president of BARVIDA).

"We do not sell confiscated vehicles. Therefore, the government should adopt business-friendly measures to alleviate the [automobile] market so that our customers can make purchases without any fear," he added.

While the automobile showrooms remain deserted and salespersons lamenting over poor sales, sales in the real estate industry -- apartments

and plots -- have also dipped sharply since January.

The decrease in sale of landed properties and apartments were reflected in the recent fair organised by Real Estate and Housing Association of Bangladesh (Rehab).

According to Rehab sources, sales of apartments and plots have gone down by almost 50 percent compared to the past year.

"Fear and discomfort have

gripped prospective buyers [apartments and plots] after various government agencies launched anti-corruption drives," said Rehab's Tanveerul Haque at a press conference.

According to Rehab officials, apart from black money holders, general people along with remittance earners are also getting discouraged to invest in the real estate sector.

"Despite the downturn in sales, the real estate entrepre-

neurs still have to pay bank interests regularly," he said, adding that this downturn the real estate sector has also caused a negative impact on all industries related to it.

According to sources, Rehab members make up an average of 6,000 apartments to ease the country's housing problems. The real estate industry along with other industries related to it contributes around 20 percent to the national GDP.

Desperate to find

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"Eighty percent of the Urdu-speaking people living in Bangladesh today were born here. And our grandparents and parents came from Bihar. So the term 'stranded Pakistani' does not appropriate for us," Hasan argued.

"I know I'm a Bangladeshi by birth. But we need a formal recognition from the state so that we can exercise our rights," he said.

In 2001, ten young residents of Geneva Camp including Hasan filed a writ petition in the High Court demanding the right to vote through enrolment as voters. In May 2003 the High Court gave a verdict in favour of the petitioners.

"After the verdict there should be no barrier for them to become citizens of Bangladesh," said Professor C R Abrar, director, Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU), University of Dhaka.

"There should be an official declaration recognising them as Bangladeshis with some plan for their proper rehabilitation," he suggested.

Some social and political issues however need to be addressed before that, Abrar mentioned. "The problem remains within the mainstream political beliefs. Our politicians need to overcome the narrow mindset that has been driving them for long. That's why the fate of the Biharis is hanging in balance for 36 long years," he added.

"There is a dispute among the Urdu-speaking people themselves. The older generation still believe Pakistan as their nation and they want to go there. The younger generation believe otherwise. The older generation should decide what is the best for their children."

The judgement of the High Court in favour of the petitioners has brightened the hopes of the young generation. One of the petitioner and the first girl from Geneva Camp to pass HSC exam, Qulsum Sharmin, said, "I was born and brought up in the territory of Bangladesh. I should have all the rights to be a citizen here and exercise my rights."

"Two of my sisters are married to Bangladeshi men. We socialise with Bangladeshi in our everyday life. I have no wish to go to

Pakistan," she added.

Qulsum gave details of some of the difficulties she had to go through as a camp resident. She said that education is not a right for the camp dwellers. "When I went to get admission in school, the first thing I had to do was to give up my camp address. I had to use a different address, in a way I had to shake off my identity."

Literacy rate is very low among the Urdu-speaking community. Today there are only 6 primary schools for them in Bangladesh. One of them is for Geneva Camp dwellers is run by Plan Bangladesh, an NGO. Around 100 children go there.

For higher education they are bound to go to educational institutions outside the camp where the authorities decline to admit them. They have to hide their identity for higher education. The community produced only one master's degree holder in 36 years.

The younger generation is gradually discarding the language of their forefathers. Most of them told Star City that speaking Urdu in Bangladesh is like speaking the 'wrong language'. Identifying themselves as residents of the camp brings nothing but trouble.

"When I was younger I constantly searched for my identity. I used to fight with Bangladeshi boys whenever they called me names because we spoke Urdu," said Khalid Hussain.

"Most of my extended family members left for Pakistan. I chose to be here because I recognise myself as a Bangladeshi, whether you accept it or not."

Khalid Hussain is also one of the 10 petitioners who is going to be the first lawyer from his community.

Since majority of the camp dwellers are not lucky enough to obtain formal education like Hasan, Qulsum or Khalid, they have no way of realising their rights. They are simply waiting for something to happen, waiting for a change of fate.

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